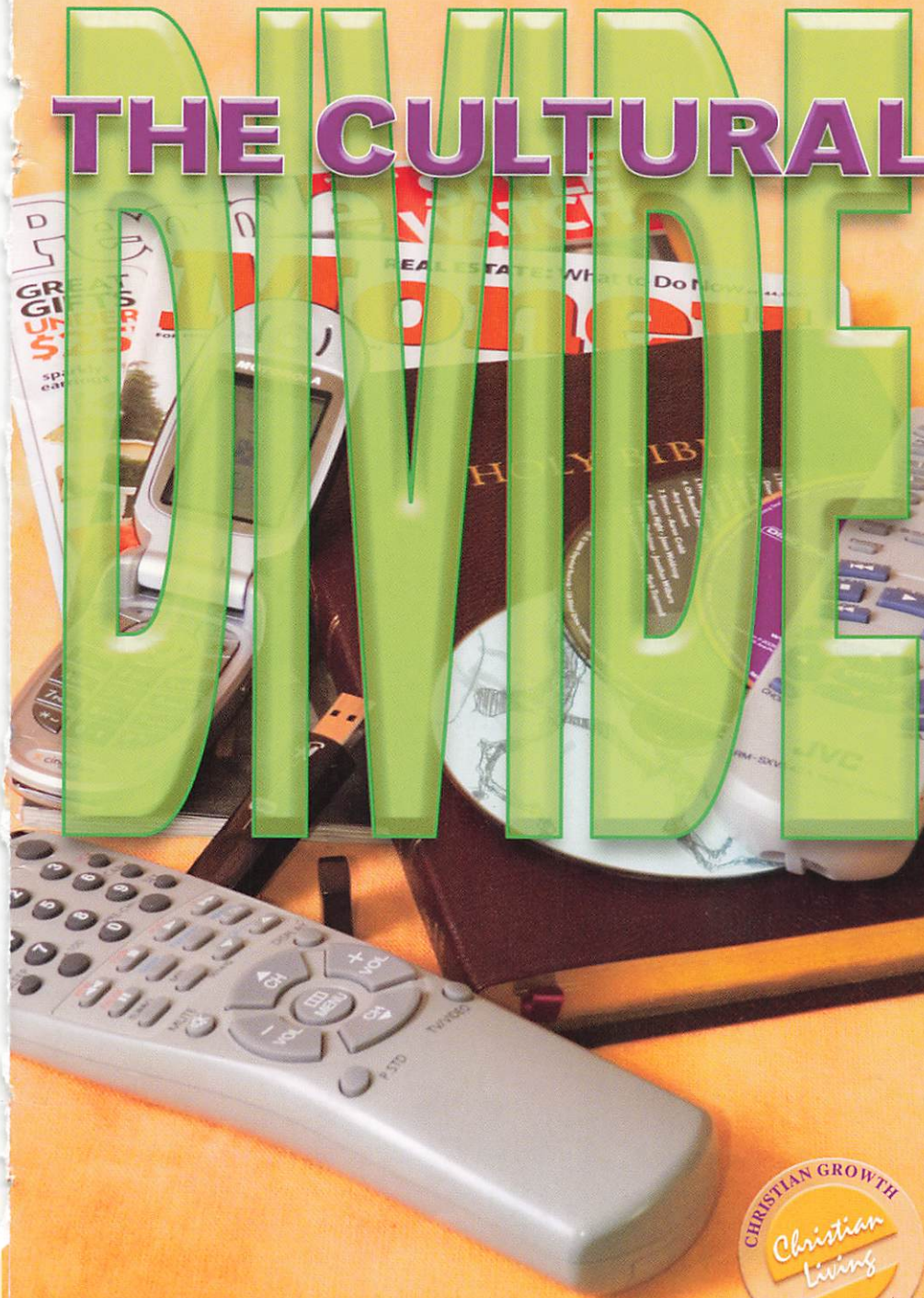
THE CULTURAL DIVIDE



CHRISTIAN GROWTH
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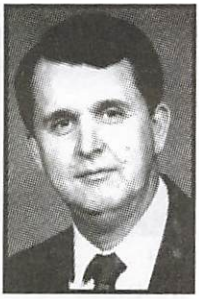
THE CULTURAL DIVIDE



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Introduction

Look back over your lifetime and identify some of the major cultural events that have shaped your outlook on life. The relaxed moral attitudes of the 1960s paved the way for radical changes in our society; now the world clamors for the normalization of every kind of deviant lifestyle imaginable.

Roe-vs-Wade laid the foundation for today's rampant abortion industry. The result: over one million abortions each year in the United States alone. Worldwide estimates range between forty and fifty million abortions every year.

Do you think the church is immune to these influences? Not hardly. Time after time polls demonstrate that believers' attitudes toward these and other major issues differ very little from those who claim no church background. You might respond, "Well, those polls include all different denominations. My church would be different." Ask around, and you will probably be shocked at what you hear, especially among your young people.

What has happened? Our culture influences what we think. And most of the time believers are shaped more by their culture than they are by their Bible. That happened in the biblical days of the judges, and it is happening in our day.

The historical background of the lessons you will study in this series lies centuries ago. But the principles you will discover are reflected on the front page of today's newspaper and in the lives of your friends, church family, and your spouse and children. If we are to have any affect on our society, we must turn to the Lord and His Word for our bearings, and stop letting the world tell us what to think. May this study challenge us all to adopt God's standards as our guide in life and to model those standards before our world.

Jerome Cooper, editor

LESSON 1

Without Leaders and Without Hearts

Judges 1:1; 21:25

The first verse of the book of Judges tells us that Joshua died. The last verse in the book of Judges says, *"In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes"* (Judges 21:25). The verses in between illustrate the conditions in that era which the last verse summarizes.

As a transitional book Judges tells why a king was required in Israel. The Lord had predicted through Moses that the people would insist on a king. He did command that the leader be godly (Deuteronomy 17:13-20). Although God seems to have preferred that they follow Him without having a king, He granted their request (1 Samuel 8:4-22). The words *"In those days there was no king in Israel"* suggest that this book was written after they had one.

The conditions obviously grew worse and worse during the time period. The structure of the book of Judges follows that theme without being intended to be chronological. In fact some of the judges probably had overlapping times in which they reigned.

No Unifying Civil Leader

The people apparently saw themselves more as confederate states rather than as the united states of Israel. Although they knew

The Heart of the Lesson

God's people need leadership and motivation to live for Him. Pray for God to raise righteous leaders and give us grace to live for Him.

they were the children of Israel, they focused on their individual tribal relationships. Many of their difficulties during this time period would have been resolved by a national consciousness. Some of the invaders which plagued them would not have dared face a sizable army gathered from all of the tribes. Because there was not a king in Israel, people did that which was right in their own eyes.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday	Joshua 23:1-11
Tuesday	Joshua 23:12-16
Wednesday	Joshua 24:1-18
Thursday	Joshua 24:19-33
Friday	1 Samuel 7
Saturday	1 Samuel 8

The book of Judges shows conditions in the transitional period. Moses had been a strong leader during the forty years in the wilderness. Then Joshua had led the conquest of the Promised Land. No judge replaced them to become a universal leader who unified the nation. The awareness of this need grew stronger as the days of the judges proceeded. The book of Judges bridges the gap in Israel's history between the time the nation entered the land of Canaan and that of the kings of Israel.

What form of government is best for a society? A variety of governing styles have been tried throughout history. Plutocracy is the rule by the rich. Anarchy describes the chaos which arises from no rule. Monarchy is the rule by a king. Democracy is rule by the people. Although many Americans feel that democracy is the preferred method for a nation, it is only as strong as the convictions of the people. Actually a benevolent, totalitarian dictator would be better than a democracy in which the majority of people were committed to immorality and perverse violence. The founders of the American republic recognized that the godliness of the people provided the only security for the future government.

Some scholars have suggested that the Lord intended for Israel to be a theocracy. This form involves the rule by God. Clearly the people lacked the integrity to reach such a state. Instead they were pulled toward doing that which was right in their own eyes.

No Dynamic Spiritual Leader

One of the earmarks of those days was the absence of dynamic, spiritual leaders. We can see that even many of the judges had major blemishes in their character. They too *"did that which was right in* [their] *own eyes."* Their examples failed to produce a truly godly generation.

Do we consider how important men and women of God are to our lives? Their teachings lay out the standards for our culture. The con-

sistency of their lifestyles reinforces the possibilities of godly living. How much of what we believe and practice has been shaped by them? On the other hand, when our leaders make compromises, they open up many doors for the future generations to enter with clear consciences. May God raise up role models today which will lead us to new heights for His glory.

When we mention judges, we envision a courtroom setting. We think about those who make decisions about right and wrong in situations and people. Although the judges of that age did serve in that capacity (Judges 4:4-5), they had many more responsibilities. They often gained the position of judge by leading their tribe to military victory. They were the spiritual and moral leaders as well as civil and legal ones. Although Deborah served as judge prior to the military campaign, most of the others had no position until first being the deliverer of the people (Judges 3:9).

No Divine Moral Compass

The parallels between the days of the judges and modern times should jump out at you. The book ends with the declaration: *"Every man did that which was right in his own eyes"* (Judges 21:25). This dependence on man's rationalization rather than God's revelation describes most people today. God had given in His revelation to Moses detailed instructions concerning acceptable behavior by His people, Israel. They chose to trust their own thinking rather than believe God. Clearly the people mixed their religion with their natural views. The book ends with a revelation about the absence of their relationship with God. They lacked the righteousness that can only come from God. The resulting conditions for that day and ours can only produce a self-destructive society.

Until the heart is right, no governmental leader will be the solution. As long as people are basing their decisions on their own reasoning, they will miss much of God's best. The tendency of the depraved nature pulls us away from our potential in the Lord.

Poor leaders are no excuse for God's people to desert righteousness or turn away from God. Believers still have a responsibility to obey God no matter what others may do. Believers can also provide a great service in their society by praying for, voting for, and supporting godly leaders. God's people should seek to do everything possible to lift up their world, rather than allowing their world to drag them down. Set godly examples by living righteously. Display godly standards, and find ways to support biblical standards in the community. Get involved. When God's people retreat, ungodly leaders will certainly take their place. God's people can be a voice for His righteousness in this world. Let your voice be heard.

LESSON 2

Living in a Heathen Society

Judges 3:12-15

The last study focused on the transitional nature of the book of Judges. This study will explore the causes of the conditions during those times. Essentially the issues grew from the failure to obey God and eliminate the evil influences of the Canaanites. It also will show the resulting cycles upon which the main portion of the book is structured.

Israel's Opportunity

To understand the significance of the events in the book of Judges you must understand the long-term context. God had promised Abraham that his seed would possess this land (Genesis 17:8). In His timing God brought Israel to the land and blessed them to capture it. He gave special instructions about the treatment of the inhabitants. Some were to be driven out. Others were to be killed and their possessions burned. The major purpose God gave for the destruction was *"that they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods; so should ye sin against the* LORD *your God"* (Deuteronomy 20:18).

Some scholars have suggested that God's drastic orders would have freed Israel from the diseases in that part of the world (Deuter-

The Heart of the Lesson

Failure to obey God's instruction will set up conditions for repeated sin and judgment. We must separate from the heathen influences in our society, or risk tragic cycles of sin and judgment.

onomy 7:15). Even though Canaan was a land flowing with milk and honey, the perversions practiced by the people opened them to disease. The land was literally vomiting out the people (Leviticus 18:24-30).

Daily Bible

Monday .....
Tuesday ..... Ju
Wednesday ..... Juc
Thursday ..... Judge
Friday ..... Judges -11
Saturday ..... Judges 3:12-31

God does not always provide an explanation for His actions. Those places where the Israelites could drive out the inhabitants and possess the cities were probably places where the threat of disease was not very great. In locations where infectious diseases existed, the complete destruction and rebuilding of the cities were required. Clearly the instructions to annihilate everyone and everything was a religious issue. The Israelites had a unique opportunity to establish a society that would be obedient to and blessed by the Lord!

Israel's Failure

The failure of Israel to be completely obedient surfaces very early in the book. The very first account records: *"And Adonibezek said, Threescore and ten kings, having their thumbs and their great toes cut off, gathered their meat under my table: as I have done, so God hath requited me. And they brought him to Jerusalem, and there he died"* (Judges 1:7). Israel might have profited by demonstrating the principles of the Golden Rule. And even though the wicked can recognize God's hand in their fall, can Israel be justified at having such fun at the expense of a prisoner of war? Is everything fair in love and war? Deuteronomy 20 lays out the rules that God's people were to follow when they went into battle. Cutting off of the thumbs and big toes made the king's movements for the food thrown under the table to appear hilarious. How did the children of Israel come up with such an idea? They were likely imitating something they saw the Canaanites doing. But such fun at the expense of others is always wrong.

After that subtle example their failures become clearer. Judah *"could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron"* (Judges 1:19). Do problems or obstacles explain the failures of God's people? The *"chariots of iron"* were the strongest weapons of that day and gave the opponent an advantage. God, however, is not limited. Later He sent water and bogged down a large number of chariots. He had sent hornets to drive out the enemy. From man's perspective the problems may be insurmountable, but for those who trust in God, they are not. They may partially explain

...ilures, but they do not excuse them.

In the same way moral or church failures cannot be condoned on the basis of the difficulties one may face. Falling into sexual sins or being caught up in addictive behavior is not beyond victory for those who truly trust the Lord.

The possibility of victorious living is illustrated by Caleb (Judges 1:20). Caleb was one of the two spies sent out by Moses forty-five years earlier. While ten of the spies said that the giants were too big, Joshua and Caleb declared that the Lord was able to give the victory (Numbers 13:30-33). After all those years Caleb defeated the giants with just his family, not the entire nation or tribe (Joshua 14:6-15). Israel's failure must be attributed to some other reason. All the tribes failed to completely drive the enemy out of their portion (Judges 1:19-36). Some barely established outposts in their section of land. Others controlled their portion and forced the Canaanites into subjection.

Israel's Consequences

Have you heard someone quote as a Bible verse the phrase "God helps those who help themselves." That wording does not exist in Scripture. In the first portion of Judges, however, we can see that God quit helping those who were not helping themselves. Following their failure to separate from the Canaanites the Lord said, *"I will not drive them out from before you; but they shall be as thorns in your sides, and their gods shall be a snare unto you"* (Judges 2:3). Although God did not deliver them from the temptation, He still can deliver through the temptation. The extra pull toward evil remained to prove the sincerity of the people's commitment.

The cycles of events during the days of the judges were foretold by the writer (Judges 2:11-16). First, the people would do evil followed by judgment in the form of an invading enemy. Next, the people would cry in anguish, and God would raise up a judge to deliver them. Tragically, the people would return to their evil soon after the passing of the judge. The cycle was shown for the first time in Judges 3:7-9. The second cycle followed the same pattern: Evil (verse 12), enemy Eglon (verses 12-14), Israel's cry (verse 15), and the deliverer, Ehud, raised (verse 15). Look for those same elements to be listed in most of the accounts of the judges.

The problem with the repeating cycles of sin is that each hardens the heart. Look at how the worsening condition is described: *"It came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they returned, and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them, and to bow down unto them; they ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way"* (Judges 2:19).

LESSON 3

Strong Woman/Weak Man

Judges 4:5-9

The book of Judges is unusual for a book of the Bible in the way in which it deals with women. Because the place of women is so prominent, several writers have interpreted the book from a feminist perspective. Some scholars even suggest that the author was a woman, perhaps writing a parody on men. Look for the contrasts between males and females throughout the book.

A survey of the entire book does show a positive emphasis given to many of the women that is unusual in such a male dominated society. On the whole, however, women do not fare any better than the men in responding to the influence of Canaanite culture. Generally they also *"did that which was right in* [their] *own eyes."*

Part of the reason for the appearance of strong women may be the low spiritual condition of the men. Many Bible students have suggested that Deborah is an example of God raising up women when no man steps into the God-given roles. The biblical position on the roles and responsibilities of men and women is rejected by those with a modern politically correct view. Many people are looking for ways to dodge the clear teachings of Scripture.

Certainly many women have been abused and mistreated though the years. In every case, however, such actions and attitudes were

The Heart of the Lesson

God always raises up a faithful servant to accomplish His purposes. Find your place in God's plan fulfilling your responsibilities as godly men and women.

contrary to the will of God. The Lord made men and women with certain unique physical and spiritual abilities. Normally life goes better by accepting those facts. A man would be foolish to pine over his inability to physically bear children. A partial list of women who played important roles in Judges is: 1. Caleb's daughter who aggressively sought an inheritance (1-3); 2. A woman who brought down violent Abimelech (9); 3. Samson's mother who was looking for the hope of Israel (13); 4. Wicked Delilah who tricked Samson (16); 5. A wicked mother who encouraged idolatry for her son (17); 6. The woman who was abused and killed by the men of Gibeah (19); and 7. The young women who were kidnapped to provide wives for the men of the tribe of Benjamin (21). In addition to this remarkable list this lesson will demonstrate the unusual influence of three specific women during this time.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday	Judges 4:1-10
Tuesday	Judges 4:11-24
Wednesday	Judges 5:1-11
Thursday	Judges 5:12-23
Friday	Judges 5:24-31
Saturday	Ephesians 5:21-33

The Place of Deborah

Chapter 4 begins with another of Israel's disheartening cycles. Israel was once again deep in sin. God permitted the Canaanites under Sisera to oppress Israel for twenty years. The people cried in anguish. God raised a judge to deliver the Israelites. Remarkably the person mentioned first is a woman, Deborah (Judges 4:1-5).

She sent for Barak and asked him, *"Hath not the Lord God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun? And I will draw unto thee to the river Kishon Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand"* (Judges 4:6-7). She was not just the woman behind the man. She was the dominant force for the Lord challenging the man. Sisera had nine hundred chariots. Chariots were the superior weapons of that day and made Sisera seem invincible in battles on flat ground. The Lord told Barak to go to the river Kishon in the valley. It looked like a bad move to Barak, but God had promised victory there. Barak's response was: *"If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go"* (Judges 4:8). Talk about hiding behind the skirts of a woman. Even with the promises of God, he would not go to battle without her.

As our title indicates the strong godly person in this account is the woman. She also is the one with the position and the influence as judge. The exception, however, proves the rule. Other commentators

have pointed out that when no man steps up to be God's man, He may raise up a godly woman. Political promoters might say, "The best man for the job is a woman." Rather than changing the plans of God for men to be the spiritual leaders, such instances represent a reproach on men. Obviously the woman used in this way has special honor. How many churches, especially small or rural, have survived because of the faithful service of godly women?

Notice how clearly God first called a man, Barak, to do the work (Judges 4:6). When he delayed, the Lord used the woman to urge him to fulfill his God given responsibility. His lack of faith emphasized her significance.

After Barak declared his dependence on Deborah, she replied, *"I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the* LORD *shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman"* (Judges 4:9). God often has a plan in which believers can participate. If we do not obey and do things His way, He will still do the work. He will find someone else to use or to give the glory. We miss the great opportunity.

A careful reading of this story (Judges 4-5) shows that Sisera was lured to the valley near the river. The rain in the mountains came down to overflow the river and saturate the ground. Of course the heavy iron chariots bogged down. The strong suit of the army became a liability. Israel was able to destroy the Canaanites very quickly.

These events show how crucial the timing of Barak's response was. His longer hesitation could have made him too late to take advantage of the Lord's work. Are there occasions in which we miss accomplishing much for the Lord because we delay?

The Passion of Jael

With the defeat of the Canaanites and the fleeing of their commanding officer, the story shifts to the next important woman in the episode. Sisera ran until exhausted and thirsty. Upon arrival at the home of Heber the Kenite, he asked Heber's wife, Jael, to protect him if anyone came looking for him. She covered him to make him comfortable and gave him milk to help him sleep. She then slipped up with a hammer and tent nail. With power she slammed the nail and connected his head to the ground. When Barak arrived, Sisera was already dead (Judges 4:22).

God had even arranged the strange method of Sisera's death so folks would talk about the woman rather than the man. Her determined efforts in each step show a religious fervor. Even though her husband was at peace with the nation, she killed Sisera as the enemy of God's people, Israel. Surely Barak immediately remembered the words of Deborah that a woman would get the honor. Do you think

that he regretted his lack of confidence earlier?

Through the years many men have demanded the place of leadership based on biblical teaching. Although that structure is given by the Lord, it cannot be claimed with a harsh, cold spirit. Any attempt to demand submission without loving as Christ loved the church is not biblical (Ephesians 5:23-31). On the other hand, a rebellious spirit by a woman toward her place of responsibility that God has given is also not biblical. The difficulties with gender issues which folks had during the days of the Judges and in our day may be the natural result of every person doing that which is right in their own eyes.

The Pain of Sisera's Mother

Chapter 5 gives the song which Deborah and Barak sang to celebrate the victory. Both rejoiced over the work of the Lord. With the poetic sense of a song, their account ends with the imagined reaction of Sisera's mother. She goes to the window and worries because he is so long in arriving (Judges 5:28). She and her friends assume the delay is because of the spoils of battle which are being taken. To encourage one another the ladies ask, *"Have they not divided the prey; to every man a damsel or two; to Sisera a prey of divers colours, a prey of divers colours of needlework, of divers colours of needlework on both sides, meet for the necks of them that take the spoil?"* (Judges 4:30). This emphasis upon the ladies' perspective, who were the enemies of Israel, is really interesting. Even heathens feel the pain that comes from the loss of their children. The sympathy for them, however, fades with the last verse: *"So let all thine enemies perish, O LORD: but let them that love him be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might. And the land had rest forty years"* (Judges 5:31). Even though we may hate to see other people who are part of God's creation suffer, we cannot forfeit support for the cause of the righteous.

LESSON 4

Fatal Flaws

Judges 8:22-27

A teenager or young adult may achieve some great accomplishment by winning an athletic game in an extraordinary fashion. For years many people will remember that event with amazement. Some people use those special moments as a jumping-off point for a life of many remarkable achievements. Others have never lived up to their promise; other than the one unique experience, they have only failures at which to point. The life of Gideon seems to parallel that latter example.

The record of Gideon's success is well known. This study will focus on his later activities. Even though Gideon experienced such a great victory over the Midianites, the narrative presented by the biblical writer tends to point out his weaknesses rather than his strengths. With each mistake he shrinks in his stature as a role model. Let each of us be challenged to strive for a lifetime of faithfulness to the Lord and not just one great feat.

Israel's cycle of despair appears again in this account: Israel did evil (6:1); Midian prevailed against Israel (verse 2); Israel cried unto the Lord (verse 6); and the Lord sent a prophet (verse 8). All of this preceded the call of Gideon. He was hiding wheat at the winepress when the angel called him. Following his destruction of the altar and idol grove to Baal in his hometown, Gideon gathered an army to go fight against Midian (Judges 6:33-35). Immediately after Gideon gathered his army, he confirmed the will of the Lord through his two tests with the fleece.

The Heart of the Lesson

God-given success can be tainted when believers fall prey to their personal weaknesses. Be careful to avoid the fatal flaws which can undermine your legacy for the Lord.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday	Judges 6:1-10
Tuesday	Judges 6:11-40
Wednesday	Judges 7:1-14
Thursday	Judges 7:15-25
Friday	Judges 8:1-21
Saturday	Judges 8:22-35

After Gideon had gathered his army of thirty-two thousand, he was told that he had too many men for God to get the glory. When the fearful were allowed to return home, the number shrunk to ten thousand. With still too many, he used the drinking practices at the well of Harod to reduce the size of his army to three hundred men (Judges 7:3-8). In obedience to the Lord Gideon led his army of three hundred to victory against an army of one hundred and thirty-five thousand. He was truly a great man who was used of the Lord to do the seemingly impossible.

Killing God's People

As Gideon and his little band of men crossed the Jordan River in pursuit of the armies of the east, they became thirsty and exhausted. When they sought refreshment from their Israelite brothers, they were told that no help would come until they had the enemy kings in their hands. Two cities, Succoth and Penuel, responded in this way (Judges 8:4-9).

Following the victory Gideon returned with the two kings, Zeba and Zalmunna. As he had promised, he killed the Israelite elders in the cities of Succoth and all the men in Penuel (Judges 8:13-17). Although such a reaction is almost understandable by us, the killing of those from Israel set a bad precedent.

Son Training

The next flaw in the character of Gideon is introduced in his efforts to train his son to kill (Judges 8:18-21). Although no mention had been made of the fact, Gideon had brought his oldest son along. When he found out that the captured kings had killed his brothers, he instructed his son to take a sword and kill the enemy kings. His son was just a child and did not respond. At the urging of the kings, Gideon finished the job himself.

Considering Gideon's earlier struggles with fearfulness, he may have been trying to inoculate his son from his weakness. Often we respond to our children in an extreme manner when we deal with areas where we have weak spots. The tendency is to treat our children too leniently or too strictly in those areas. Normally the only way to find the proper balance is by gaining peace from dealing with our failures.

Idol Making

When Gideon returned as a military hero, he received an invitation to become the leader of the people. They probably wanted him to set up a family dynasty and rule as king. He strongly answered, *"I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you"* (Judges 8:23).

He spoke the right words, but his actions did not match his answer. He requested the *"earrings of his prey. (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)"* (Judges 8:24). He took that massive amount of gold and made an ephod that eventually was set up for idol worship by Israel and Gideon's family (Judges 8:27). Instead of pushing the people to have the Lord as their only king, he set a temptation before them.

In addition to this failure related to his proclamation that only the Lord should be king, Gideon reveals his true feeling in his selection of a name for his son, *Abimelech.* The name can mean "My father is king." What a strange choice of a name for his son when Gideon said that he would never be king. That ambition would shape the life of this son.

Heathen Relations

The family information at the end of the story might seem coincidental. Most of the time, however, family relationships reveal the true nature of a person. The passage adds, *"And Gideon had threescore and ten sons of his body begotten: for he had many wives"* (Judges 8:30). Multiple wives was not biblically acceptable but probably involved the imitation of the heathen. Some of the Canaanite records suggest that having seventy sons was desirable because one of their gods had seventy sons. That number of sons will surface several times in Judges. It helps to show how influential the Israelite leaders were.

The home of the concubine in Shechem was a center of heathen worship (Judges 8:31; 9:4). As Gideon dabbled with ungodly lifestyles, he lost more and more credibility as God's man. Take to heart Paul's admonition, *"But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway"* (1 Corinthians 9:27).

Gideon's failing began immediately after he won the remarkable victory over the Midianites. In the same way we are often tested more by success than by difficulty. Pride and the feeling of self-sufficiency often bring the downfall of a Christian. Recognize the danger and remember God's warning: *"Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall"* (Proverbs 16:18).

LESSON 5

God Rules Over Chaos

Judges 9:56-57

The immoral and unjust development of circumstances in life may cause us to wonder if God is still in control. When the terrorists killed thousands on nine-eleven, many Americans began to question God. Where was He? Why does He allow such events to happen? Even when we do not understand how or why, we should trust that God is working all things for His glory and our ultimate good.

God Rules Over Tragedy

During times of tragedy it becomes more difficult to recognize the good which God is accomplishing. When Abimelech killed sixty-nine of his seventy half-brothers, it looked as though everything was spiraling out of control (Judges 9:5). The fact that they were all slaughtered on one stone made a statement. The ritualistic nature of the massacre let others know that Abimelech had power and did not hesitate to use it. The influential sons of prominent Gideon wiped out in such a crude way shook the foundations of their society.

God was still in control, however, even though no evidence supported the view. Three years would pass with Abimelech apparently directing the events. Even though God was silent, He was not worried about the final outcome. Sometimes when much around us seems to

The Heart of the Lesson

God is working all things for His glory and our ultimate good. Rest in God's providential working to bring His justice in His timing.

be in a dreadful situation, we must be reminded to keep our eyes on Him and not on the situation. Yes, Gideon was dead. Yes, his sons were dead. The son who survived, however, was a token of what God had planned. Often in the worst situations examples of God's mercy stand out. Magnifying the Lord for those small vestiges of His goodness can be the key to changing the situation from horrible to good. With their backs beaten Paul and Silas were chained in prison, yet they praised God until they were delivered (Acts 16:22-40).

Daily Bible Readings

Monday ..... Judges 8:1-9
Tuesday ..... Judges 8:10-21
Wednesday ..... Judges 8:22-35
Thursday ..... Judges 9:1-21
Friday ..... Judges 9:22-49
Saturday ..... Judges 9:50-57

God Rules Over Politics

When Abimelech allured the men of Shechem to accept him as king (Judges 9:1-4), the issue was in the Lord's hand. Without His permission, Abimelech would have seen no success.

God's sovereignty is our encouragement when leaders seem to make decisions out of step with God's will and our good. Solomon wrote, *"The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will"* (Proverbs 21:1). God is working out His purposes in the decisions of those in authority. In one sense it does not matter which party or person is in control; God's will cannot be thwarted. Solomon also said, *"The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD"* (Proverbs 16:33). No absolute accidents take place. You can throw the lot (dice) onto the table, but God determines the numbers that appear. When circumstances appear to be happening haphazardly or even directed by evil forces, God is still God. The Christian should rest in this truth.

In the same way in which God allowed Abimelech to rise to power, He was able to turn the hearts of his supporters away from him. Notice how easily He accomplished this: *"Then God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech"* (Judges 9:23).

God Rules Over Military Victories

God reigns as sovereign over the battles in history. He always accomplishes His purposes even though people appear to be making their own decisions in freedom. In horrible situations at war which seem to be outside His revealed will, God continues to rule.

The ultimate key to victory is not who has the greatest weapons or the best military. Later the Lord warned Israel, *"Woe to them that go*

down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the LORD!" (Isaiah 31:1). The horses and chariots of that day compare to the newest tanks and nuclear weapons of our day. Negotiations of peace treaties and the development of a strong military may be prudent generally, but God's people cannot place their confidence in anything but the Lord. He is our source and supply.

When the men of Shechem turned on Abimelech, it appeared that he would fall quickly. But their part in the killing of Gideon's sons ensured that they would be destroyed. Following their defeat a remnant entered the tower of their city for protection. Abimelech took a tree limb and piled it on the tower. After his army did the same, he lit a bonfire and burned everyone inside (Judges 9:47-49). God had given Abimelech the strength and wisdom to judge Shechem.

Although the reason is not given, Abimelech then went to Thebez and attacked that city. Again the people fled to the tower of the city. Following the tactic that had been successful before, he went to burn the door to the tower. This time a woman threw a piece of millstone and broke his skull. Do you see the irony of God using a woman to bring down this man who desired greatness so much?

God Rules Over Final Justice

Did you notice that the proceedings recorded in this account are different from other situations in the book of Judges? No mention is made of an outside enemy. Even though the events occurred during the time period of the judges, the central character, Abimelech, is not a judge. He has aspirations of being king, but the passage never indicates that God was with him.

It appears obvious that neither Abimelech nor the men of Shechem were right with God nor had his sanctioning blessing. The Lord worked to bring about the destruction of both. First He used Abimelech to eliminate the men of Shechem. Then God had a woman strategically placed to drop the stone on the head of Abimelech. God prefaces the description of these actions with His own explanation: *"That the cruelty done to the threescore and ten sons of Jerubbaal might come, and their blood be laid upon Abimelech their brother, which slew them; and upon the men of Shechem, which aided him in the killing of his brethren"* (Judges 9:24). After the events take place, the chapter ends by repeating the explanation for what happened (Judges 9:56-57). Although each had his day, God brought all the sinners into judgment in his timing. That principle is true with everyone. If God does not bring about justice in this life, He will in the life to come. Keep confident that no wrong will survive the final judgment.

LESSON 6

Two Wrongs Do not Make a Right

Judges 11:30-31

God's grace and mercy is amazing. Considering our repeated bouts of faithlessness and rebellion, He could have been justified in destroying mankind. The book of Judges stands as a testimony to His patience and long suffering. Israel adopted most of the heathen gods in their region. The cycle of sin and judgment was repeated with eighteen years of bondage to the Ammonites. As the Ammonites set their sights on the main portion of Israel's homeland, the Lord's chosen people cried out for deliverance. His reply was that He had already delivered them from the Egyptians, Amorites, Ammonites, Philistines, Zidonians, Amalekites, and Maonites (Judges 10:11-12). He told them to look at their chosen gods. Although the Lord's faithfulness to His covenant relationship kept Him from destroying Israel, He appeared to be fed up with them. Woe unto the people who repeatedly take advantage of the Lord's goodness so they can give themselves to evil. Even after falling so many times, they can still reach the heart of God when they genuinely repent (Judges 10:16). Such compassion should encourage us.

The people began looking for the military leader who could carry them to victory. The bravest and best fighter happened to be Jephthah. His family had run him out of the country. They did not want an illegitimate son to inherit any of their father's property. Reluc-

The Heart of the Lesson

What comes out of our mouths reveals our true nature. Guard your tongue lest it get you into trouble.

tantly he returned to head the army. After his attempts at a peaceful settlement with Ammon failed, Jephthah went to fight them. On the way he *"vowed a vow unto the LORD, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering"* (Judges 11:30-31). As he came back home following a great slaughter of the enemy, his daughter came out to meet him. In anguish he told her about his promise to the Lord.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday ..... Judges 11:1-11
Tuesday ..... Judges 11:12-28
Wednesday ..... Judges 11:29-40
Thursday ..... Judges 12:1-7
Friday ..... Judges 12:8-15
Saturday ..... Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

The Biblical Vow Offering

Jephthah's rash vow could have been okay if the teachings of Moses had been followed. Vows to make an offering were biblical. They were part of the peace offering system. A person would make a vow similar to this wording: "Lord, if you do this, I promise to do this." Normally it involved the offering of animal sacrifices in appreciation for what the Lord had done. The fulfillment of the vow, however, could involve those who were given to the Lord's cause permanently or temporarily, such as a child or a servant. Jacob (Genesis 28:20-22) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:11) are Old Testament examples of the vow offerings. These people could be redeemed for a certain payment (Leviticus 27:2-7). This vow of people normally involved slaves under their control. Usually the vow of a certain animal could not be replaced with another (Leviticus 27:9-10).

Three kinds of peace offerings were allowed (Leviticus 7:11-12, 16). First a thank offering could be given to express appreciation for a special, unexpected blessing from the Lord. A free will offering could be presented just out of a free heart without any special reason. The vow offering was almost like a deal with God. All of these peace offerings were voluntary. Is there a place in our prayer worship life for each of these? Do you think that God makes such agreements as the vow offerings with people today?

The Bad Vow Offering

We have seen that under the proper conditions the vow of Jephthah would have been in line with the Mosaic law. In this case, however, he made a bad vow. First his vow failed the motivation test. He seemed to be using the vow to add to his chances for victory in

battle. It sounds like a superstitious expression out of line with pure faith in God. In those days in which every man did that which was right in his own eyes, the influence of the heathen Canaanites shaped their thinking in the serious time of battle. When Jephthah fled his father's house, he had surrounded himself with *"vain men"* (Judges 11:3). Though the vow was to Jehovah, it reveals an unbiblical view of God that probably arose from his environment. Even in the service of the Lord that faulty thinking would be present.

Remarkably Judges 11:29 testifies, *"Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah."* How could he make such an awful statement and be filled with the Spirit? How could he be so successful in the battle immediately following such an error? Because the natural understanding of the words seems so repugnant, many scholars have tried to explain away the vow and its fulfillment. They feel that the vow was only that his daughter would be a virgin and die without children. The word in verse 31 for *burnt offering*, however, is the same as found in Leviticus 1:4.

What makes the vow and fulfillment worse is that it resulted in human sacrifice. To be shaped by the society around us is not smart for God's people, but to offer your child in sacrifice is perversion. That practice showed that they were no better than their heathen neighbors. The Lord always stood against human sacrifice as an abomination. The reputation of godly people would certainly be improved if those who are committing blasphemous practices would drop all identification with the Lord and his people.

The Broken Vow Offering

On several occasions in the book of Judges people follow through with rash and ill-advised vows. We have a difficulty relating to their mindset. In this day and age people break their word without any thought of God or their good name. At least then they recognized the seriousness of making a vow to the Lord and not following through (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7). The cost may be severe, however, but two wrongs do not make a right. Under the right circumstances a person has to admit his mistakes and suffer the consequences. In 2 Samuel 24 King David sinned in counting Israel. Given a choice of three judgments, he threw himself on the mercy of God (2 Samuel 24:14). Sometimes our sins leave us no easy choices. Deciding how to respond is especially difficult when our wrongs affect others.

If Jephthah had not followed through with his vow, what would God have done? No answer to this question can be given. Even if the Lord would have reacted in a powerfully destructive manner, the matter would have been in His hands.

LESSON 7

What Kind of Critic Are You?

Judges 12:1-7

Criticism normally falls into the categories of constructive or destructive. The purpose and results of the criticism determine which kind it is. Constructive criticism will help the situation and build up the person criticized. Destructive criticism has the opposite effect by harming and tearing down.

We all need honest evaluations to help us improve. The fact is, however, that most of us struggle with any criticism. A quote in a twelve-step program says, "Constructive criticism is when I tell you what is wrong with you; destructive criticism is when you tell me what is wrong with me." Even constructive criticism can be difficult to take. Why do we struggle so much and resist the help? To me the unavoidable answer is our pride.

Everyone needs a special person who can tell the truth about our failures. Solomon expressed it this way: *"Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful"* (Proverbs 27:6). We need honest criticism, but to find it profitable we must feel that someone is *"speaking the truth in love"* (Ephesians 4:15). In this study several principles will be presented that will help you decide whether your criticisms are constructive or destructive.

The Heart of the Lesson

Destructive criticism will harm God's people and His work. Apply biblical principles to determine if your criticisms are destructive or constructive.

The Easy Criticism

Daily Bible Readings

Monday ..... Matthew 7:1-6
Tuesday ..... Matthew 7:15-20
Wednesday ..... 2 Corinthians 2:6-16
Thursday ..... Numbers 11:1-15
Friday ..... Numbers 11:16-35
Saturday ..... Numbers 12:1-16

The men of Ephraim went to Jephthah and asked, "Why did you go to fight Ammon and did not call us to go with you?" (Author's paraphrase of Judges 12:1). Criticizing is truly the easy road. Two modern football expressions fit the situation with Ephraim and with many criticizers today: the Monday Morning Quarterback, and the Armchair Quarterback. Notice that the Monday Morning Quarterback is giving his opinions a day or two after the game was completed. The timing makes it too late to provide any real difference. Ephraim was criticizing Jephthah after the battle was over. The vision brought up in our minds of an Armchair Quarterback is that of an overweight, out-of-shape, older guy. He loudly denounces the failures of the real athletes during the past weekend. Although the principles apply in many areas of life, surely Christians should be more sympathetic to those on the front lines serving the Lord.

Destructive criticism can be habit forming. This incident was not the first time Ephraim had criticized others' actions. Following Gideon's victory with the three hundred men, the men of Ephraim said, *"Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites? And they did chide with him sharply"* (Judges 8:1). Often the pastor and other church members know beforehand who will discourage their efforts with negative comments. Have you heard about the pessimistic fellow who said, "I would be an optimist, but I am afraid it would not work out"? Churches and denominations can develop that expectation to fail. We serve a great God. We should be people of faith. At least some of the time we should be looking for great things to happen. Seeing the potential for your church should excite God's people. What are your expectations of your church for the future? May Jesus' wording ring true here: *"According to your faith be it unto you"* (Matthew 9:29).

Gideon's reply to Ephraim shows us how we should respond to milder criticism (Judges 8:2-3). Actually he appeases their anger with flattery. He told them that he was nothing compared to them and that they had even accomplished greater victories in their battles. The soft answer of Proverbs 15:1-2 worked in defusing an explosive situation. Sometimes silence is the best approach to critics. We should learn to cultivate the proper attitude toward some criticisms as in the proverb "Taking it with a grain of salt." Such a reaction will often keep a situation from escalating. On some occasions a mature person simply

ignores the comments. May God grant us the wisdom to know when to keep quiet and when a stronger response is needed.

In this incident Ephraim went beyond criticism to threatening to burn down Jephthah's house with him in it (Judges 12:1). Destructive criticism often leads to greater wrongs. Pride, jealousy, and the desire for preeminence pushed the Ephraimites toward extreme, destructive behavior, and they will do the same to you.

The Uninvolved Criticism

Those who are actually involved in a work usually find it harder to criticize. Destructive critics, however, do not understand the struggles which took place when decisions were made. Jephthah reacted to the charges from Ephraim by explaining, *"I and my people were at great strife with the children of Ammon; and when I called you, ye delivered me not out of their hands"* (Judges 12:2). The situation was desperate. Jephthah indicates they did the best they could.

The destructive criticizers often do not do anything to help the situation; they only criticize. As Ephraim they stop with telling what is wrong. In almost any situation we need to try to find solutions, rather than pointing out blame. Preachers and churches need to be solution oriented in our discussions of the conditions of our modern day culture. Yes, it may be in a mess, but what are we going to do about it through the power of God?

Does a person lose the right to criticize if he does not enter the fight? The old saying about government is: "If you do not vote, you lose your right to criticize." Surely involvement gives some credibility to our opinion. D. L. Moody had a lady approach him and condemn his grammar in his evangelistic crusade. He asked the refined lady what she was doing with her grammar in sharing the gospel. When she told him that she was not doing anything, he told her that he thought God was more pleased with the way he was doing it than in the way she was not doing it. May God help us to work hard and then wisely evaluate our efforts.

Because the destructive criticizers are so removed from the action, they often do not see what is being accomplished. Jephthah said, *"When I saw that ye delivered me not, I put my life in my hands, and passed over against the children of Ammon, and the LORD delivered them into my hand"* (Judges 12:3). As is normal, the Lord blessed in spite of the criticizers and not because of them. The Ephraimites were viewing the entire scenario from personal eyes and not from the perspective of what God was doing. They were actually upset at Him. Before you criticize make sure it will not place you in opposition to God. Opposing God through destructive criticism of people trying to do His work is quite dangerous.

The destructive criticizers only see the negative. That depressing spirit can kill any work. In the worst circumstances God's people should be able to rejoice in the Lord. His goodness is all around.

The Identified Criticism

Criticizers often do not realize how they sound. Although not the main emphasis in the passage, we shall see the Ephraimites did not recognize how their words gave them away. The men of Gilead fought and defeated the army from the tribe of Ephraim. When the vanquished army found themselves on the wrong side of Jordan, they tried to cross the river to return home. The Gileadites required them to say *Shibboleth*, but they could not pronounce the "sh" sound. This allowed the men from Gilead to kill those trying to return.

In a similar way the people who criticize often do not recognize how they sound. They think that it makes them look important. Putting down others somehow makes them appear greater than those they are criticizing. The context is different, but they give themselves away like those from Ephraim. Be wary of those in our churches who constantly attempt to exalt themselves by low rating others. If they do that without sympathy to others, will they not do the same to you?

The Damaging Criticism

Destructive criticizers often do not recognize how much damage they will cause. The passage ends: *"There fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand"* (Judges 12:6). The Ephraimites had approached the issue as though they were playing a game. The final result, however, was forty-two thousand dead. How tragic that Jewish brothers were killing Jewish brothers in such a fight.

Many have recognized too late that *"the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell"* (James 3:5-6). Great good or great harm can result from the words spoken.

Have you been criticizing the church or her leaders? How did you frame your words? Was it easy or difficult to criticize? Did you recognize that your criticism could have easily become habit forming? Did you criticize without being involved or without having a solution to help? Was your criticism only negative without any recognition of what God was doing? Do you think that others viewed you as whining and focusing on self as you criticized? Will the result of your criticism have long-range, positive influence or negative results? Use these questions as criteria to determine if your criticism was constructive or destructive.

LESSON 8

Never Learning

Judges 13:1-5

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, *"No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon"* (Matthew 6:24). Those words fit Samson so well we must wonder if Jesus had him in mind. Samson illustrates the principle so clearly that it makes it easy to apply it to our lives. Worldly motives undermine everything which we do.

So many paradoxes stand out concerning this man. First he was chosen before birth by the Lord to be a judge in Israel. He had to follow a Nazarite vow (Judges 13:4). The Nazarite vow was a vow of dedication to the Lord (Numbers 6:1-2). It required several areas of separation to the Lord. He would be separated from alcoholic drinks and plants (Numbers 6:3). The purpose of this requirement was probably to picture separation from fleshly pleasure. The next symbol of separation required no haircuts (Numbers 6:5). This outward sign was a testimony of the vow to others. Finally the Nazarite was to avoid all that was ceremonially unclean, especially touching a dead body (Numbers 6:6-7). He was even forbidden from touching his immediate family if they died. The rules also told what to do in case of accidental defilement (Numbers 6:9-12). The person under the vow

The Heart of the Lesson

Worldly motives undermine our service for God. Recognize the areas in which mixing pleasure with your service to God hinders your accomplishments for Him.

would shave, offer sacrifices, and start over to fulfill the time of the vow. The Nazarite vow was a common method for folks to dedicate themselves to the Lord at a higher degree for a limited period of time. Paul seems to have made a Nazarite vow during his missionary journeys.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday.....Judges 13:6-25
Tuesday.....Judges 14:1-7
Wednesday.....Judges 14:8-20
Thursday.....Judges 15:1-20
Friday.....Judges 16:1-22
Saturday.....Judges 16:23-31

Samson's Nazarite vow is unusual in several ways. It was instituted at the insistence of an angel before his birth. It was required of his mother before his birth. It was to last all his life and not for a limited period of time. Ironically Samson is the only judge declared by vow to be dedicated to the Lord, and yet he seems less dedicated in many ways.

We shall see that as Samson lived his life for himself, he violated each area of dedication involved in the vow. The consequences of his decisions seem obvious to us. Because he was so self absorbed, he never saw what was happening.

Living for the Unclean

When Samson was traveling to arrange his wedding at Timnath, he faced a lion in the vineyards (Judges 14:5-6). What was someone with his vow doing in the vineyards (Numbers 6:3-4)? He killed the lion with his bare hands. This probably violated his vow but could be explained as a necessity.

Later he returned for the final part of the wedding to take his bride and celebrate (Judges 14:8). He went by to check on the carcass of the lion and found honey to eat. This detour cannot be explained except as wanton. This honey in the body was a clear violation of the vow. Although the average Jew had to be careful to keep the kosher laws, the person dedicated to God as judge and deliverer had to show special caution. In the same way all Christians should separate themselves to the Lord. The person, however, who desires to be God's unusual servant must exercise greater care.

Afterward Samson *"came to his father and mother, and he gave them, and they did eat: but he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcase of the lion"* (Judges 14:9). Hiding what he did from his parents was significant. God has given us authorities in our lives to help us do right. If he would have informed them, they could have helped him, but that was not his leaning. He did not want the help. He enjoyed life on the edge. Most of us have failed at times to appreciate the value of parental counsel. When he violated his vow

concerning the unclean without any consequences, it surely emboldened him. Every disobedience seemed to have no consequences or those that he could adjust to easily. This same process causes many today to feel they can sin and get by with it.

Living for Sex

Samson was clearly driven by the sensual side of his life. In addition to his mother, at least three women had substantial influence in his story. They are undoubtedly only given as samples to show his lifestyle. A look at each one of them reveals the woman weakness of the man with supernatural physical strength.

When Samson's parents tried to convince him that an Israelite wife would be best, he insisted on the Philistine woman of Timnath. Although Samson may have known that the Lord had greater purposes, he was clearly enamored with her. With feeling he stated, *"Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well"* (Judges 14:3). When she tempted him to tell her his riddle, he could not refuse. Later, even though he knew that he had been tricked and was angry, he couldn't stay away from her permanently (Judges 15:1). Although he tried to combine the passion with a desire to be used by God, he lived as though the relationships with the women were more important than those with God. This attitude has ruined the effectiveness of many Christians.

Next Samson went to the Philistine city of *"Gaza, and saw there an harlot, and went in unto her"* (Judges 16:1). Although the Philistines were not part of the list of Canaanite nations, they were certainly heathen and were to be avoided. Also going to the harlot was a violation of the law of Moses. As to be expected it ended with Samson in trouble. The men of Gaza came and surrounded the city. They were waiting until daylight to get Samson when he came from the harlot. Again his supernatural strength allowed him to escape the consequences of his actions.

Samson had still not learned the error of his way nor how much he needed the Lord's help. He had not learned what an honor it was to be endowed and called to serve God. A person like him will not learn until the pain becomes extreme. What a shame that God must use such means to get our attention.

Of course the third woman in his life was Delilah. The Bible simply says that he loved her. As we read through the events concerning her, we can see what was happening, but Samson apparently couldn't. With almost a play on words the events of his blindness to Delilah's intentions develop up to the time of his physical blinding. He told her that his strength could be broken with: 1. seven undried bowstrings made from tendons; 2. new, unused ropes; 3. weaving his hair on a loom; and 4. shaving his head. Samson may represent the people of

that age in his inability to learn the dangers. As he played around with his abilities, the people during the time of the judges played with the sinful culture around them until they were overcome. Sadly many believers today are traveling down a similar road.

Living for Revenge

Samson did kill some Philistines during his lifetime. The context, however, in most cases is because he was angry or vengeful, not to glorify the Lord. His primary motivation after his riddle was solved was his anger (Judges 14:19). When he found out that his wife had been given to his best man, he had a personal cause (Judges 15:3-5). As he prayed to destroy the Philistines with his final strength, he gave his reasoning as: *"Strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes"* (Judges 16:28).

Samson failed to learn how to live for God rather than living for himself. All the signs were there to warn him that the bridges were out on his life road. He ignored them and had to suffer the sad consequences. Are you different from Samson? Do you have a pet sin which you have failed to defeat through the years? Have you dedicated yourself to the Lord and failed to live up to that commitment?

LESSON 9

Mixing Paganism With True Religion

Judges 17:1-6

While visiting our family in Dallas, we all went to the mall to Build-a-Bear for my grandson. Later my granddaughter chose to build-a-kitty. Each picked out the design of the animal as well as the stuffing, clothes, and other items all coordinated in a special theme.

Building toys for kids is a special treat for grandparents and grandkids, but our text tells about build-a-god. How strange the story develops with the main Israelite characters making their own gods and setting up a religion to suit themselves!

Many people today want to build their own god. They want their religion to conform to their expectations rather than having their lives shaped by the Lord. Some want only love and no righteousness or judgment. Such picking and choosing make their creation far inferior to the Deity revealed in Scripture.

The Strange Case of Mixed Identification

The key character in this account is revealed as *"a man of mount Ephraim, whose name was Micah"* (Judges 17:1). We notice immediately that his parents had named him for the Lord. The choice of a biblical name is one way to identify the godly expectations of

The Heart of the Lesson

The mixture of paganism with true religion produces strange beliefs and practices. Be careful to test your lifestyle with the Bible rather than public opinion.

parents. If you name your children after Bible people whose character you admire, you can regularly stress the importance of that trait.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday ..... Exodus 20:1-17
Tuesday ..... Deuteronomy 6:1-15
Wednesday ..... Isaiah 37:19
Thursday ..... Isaiah 40:18-22
Friday ..... Jeremiah 7:1-11
Saturday ..... Matthew 6:24

Micah means "Who is like Jehovah?" The answer to that question is no one or nothing. The Lord is greater than anyone and cannot be compared to any. Because God is so unique the Ten Commandments forbade making any image to represent the Lord. God permits no substitutes. He is a spirit and must be worshiped in spirit and in truth.

Many people today identify with the Lord, but they would not pass a litmus test for Christians. They wear crosses and tee shirts which connect them to the Savior. They declare publicly that they are saved or members of a certain congregation. These same individuals, however, conduct themselves in ways indistinguishable from the world. Their speech, dress, and conduct matches that of most unbelievers. Identification with the Lord is needed, but it does not ensure rightness with God. Combining true religious principles with pagan living undermines the seriousness of your relationship with God.

The Strange Condition of Mixed Superstition

The biblical record continues with Micah confessing, *"The eleven hundred shekels of silver that were taken from thee, about which thou cursedst, and spakest of also in mine ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it"* (Judges 17:2). Several aspects of the statement by Micah are surprising. He confessed stealing from his mother. Now stealing is one of the Ten Commandment prohibitions. A nice Jewish boy should not do this, but stealing from your parents seems especially revolting. Eleven hundred shekels of silver made the amount of the theft substantial.

Why did Micah confess taking the silver? It appears that he was concerned about the curse of his mother. That curse probably involved taking the name of the Lord lightly. In that sense the mother was setting the wrong example. James stresses, *"Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be"* (James 3:10). The mixture of praising God on Sunday morning at church and cursing in the Lord's name on Monday morning at work is inexcusable.

In this case, however, she had pronounced a curse on the one who had stolen her silver. Micah stressed that he had heard it with his

own ears. Apparently he was afraid of what would happen to him because of the curse. In the context of the remaining verses of the chapter, his response does not appear to be godly repentance but founded on superstitious religion.

In private some pastors today will express their concerns that many of the moves at church do not stem from a deep movement by the Holy Spirit. Instead the motivations are temporal.

The Strange Confusion of Mixed Consecration

After Micah had confessed and restored the silver to his mother, she began, *"I had wholly dedicated the silver unto the LORD from my hand"* (Judges 17:3). Complete dedication unto the Lord is good. She continues, *"For my son, to make a graven image and a molten image: now therefore I will restore it unto thee"* (Judges 17:3). The mixture becomes sin.

Was it one idol or two? It could have been a carved idol and a different one poured into a mold. Another possibility is that the one idol was shaped first, and the silver was overlaid around it.

The next strange detail is the amount of the silver she gave to the founder for the making of the idol: two hundred shekels of silver. The entire amount of eleven hundred shekels seems to have been promised in verse 3. Where are the other nine hundred shekels? Some scholars think that the remainder was used to support their homemade temple, but the scripture really does not say. The carnal values and love of material things by both mother and son surfaces in almost all of these early verses.

The mixture of the pagan and true religion of the mother surfaces again in the actions of the son in verse 5. He already had a house of gods. He adds an ephod, a household god, and sets one of his sons apart to be priest. He has no authority from God to do any of this. The excitement of religion draws many into positions to which they have no right.

The Strange Conclusion of Mixed Rationalization

Verse 6 duplicates the last verse of the book of Judges. It explains how all these strange actions can happen. During those days the people were making their decisions based on their own reasoning. When the revelation from God is not the basis, justification for any wrong can be made. In that situation those who are not right with God will believe any explanation. We must be careful or we too will find ourselves justifying the pagan beliefs and practices of our day.

LESSON 10

When God's Man Is for Sale

Judges 17:7-13

Our studies in the book of Judges have reached the last section. The first division of the book revealed the early days with Israel's opportunities to drive out the heathen Canaanites (Judges 1-2). The bulk of the book gives an account of the Lord raising up deliverers, or judges, recounting the cycles of sin, judgment, cries, and a deliverer (Judges 3-16). We are now in the portion of the book in which the consequences of their depraved culture dominate the society (Judges 17-21). The previous lesson demonstrated the depravity of individuals and families. This study will spotlight conditions in those set aside to be the spiritual leaders. The book will end with a ghastly story which someone has compared to a chain saw massacre. Self centered and godless thinking appear to permeate society from the individuals, to the families, to the religious leaders, to the tribes, and to the nation.

All of us should recognize the warning about the cultural influence of the heathens around us. In his book on Judges and Ruth in the *The New American Commentary* series, Daniel L. Block says that Judges shows the *Canaanization* of Israel. It is remarkable that they had no television or computers to spread sinful philosophies. Gradually everyone was influenced.

We shall see that even the spiritual leaders are not exempt from

The Heart of the Lesson

When God's leaders are for sale, the work ceases to be the Lord's. Provide for your pastor's needs and hold up a standard of integrity in his work.

being bought. May it serve as a warning to pastors and church leaders not to compromise for personal profit. Paul wrote that if he sought to please men, he ceased to be the servant of God (Galatians 1:10).

Daily Bible Readings

Monday ..... 1 Timothy 3:1-13
Tuesday ..... Joshua 21:1-42
Wednesday ..... Titus 1:5-11
Thursday ..... John 10:1-18
Friday ..... 1 Peter 5:1-4
Saturday ..... 2 Corinthians 11:1-15

No Source of Income

The new section of the story starts: *"There was a young man out of Bethlehemjudah of the family of Judah, who was a Levite, and he sojourned there"* (Judges 17:7). This Levite lived in Bethlehem of Judah. Of course this little village a few miles south of Jerusalem would become famous at a later time. Judaism would focus on it as the birthplace of King David. Christians remember it as the place where Jesus was born. Why was the Levite there at that time? The listing of the forty-eight Levitical cities and six cities of refuge which would be the inheritance of the tribe of Levi does not mention Bethlehem (Joshua 21). Obviously he was not learning to serve the Lord in the tabernacle or temple.

Also the scripture text indicates that he *sojourned* in Bethlehem. The word indicates that it served as his temporary home. He was just staying there until his wanderlust moved him. Because of the spiritual conditions of his day, he may not have had the normal support which the Lord had established. In almost all of the sacrifices offered by the people a portion went to the priestly tribe. During the apathy for true worship which prevailed in that time, the priests would undoubtedly be short in the amount of tithes and offerings which they received.

This financial need may partially explain why the Levite would sell his services as a priest. It does not, however, condone it. Even if the church fails to adequately provide for the needs of its pastors, God's man must trust in the Lord and not people. He is the true supply even when it comes through individuals or the congregation. Pastors who fail to develop that perspective often become bitter. I understand that at one time someone prayed, "Lord, you keep him humble and we will keep him poor." Gratefully such old ideas have passed away.

You Get What You Pay For

Although the lack of contentment by the Levite is presented subtly, it seems that he was a perfect match for Micah who was introduced in the previous study. When Micah found out that he had met a Levite, he immediately offered him the position as priest in his

house of gods. Listen to the offer that was too good to refuse: *"Dwell with me, and be unto me a father and a priest, and I will give thee ten shekels of silver by the year, and a suit of apparel, and thy victuals. So the Levite went in"* (Judges 17:10). Food, clothes, spending money, and the honor of being called the father of the religion attracted the young man.

Block points out the word for *consecrated* in verse 12 literally means "to fill the hands," but it may have a double meaning here. To *ordain* probably symbolized "to fill their hands with responsibility." In this case the Levite was literally filling his hands with the silver given him by his benefactor.

In the New Testament pastors and deacons are warned several times not to accept their responsibilities based on what financial profit can be gained. The wording in our Bible is almost poetic: *"Not for filthy lucre"* (1 Timothy 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:2). So many warnings are given because the Lord knows the weakness of the flesh. Make sure that your ministry focuses on the needy and not on provoking the successful to give to you.

As the narrator presents this story we almost wonder how Micah could have kept a straight face when he said, *"Now know I that the* LORD *will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest"* (Judges 17:13). Does he not know that God forbade the making of idols? Does he not know that the Levite was only going through the motions for the money? Many today make similar assumptions. Because they go to church, tithe, or help the needy, they feel that God will bless them even though these actions are done without enthusiasm for the Lord and in connection with immorality or unethical behavior. God is not impressed by our efforts.

What happened to Micah's poor son that he had ordained for the work earlier? Was he angry or relieved? No information is shared about this, but many of us would like to know. Clearly his father had used him and dropped him without hesitation.

No Man of God

The Levite was definitely no man of God. The one who controlled the money was the one who called the shots. Sadly such situations exist in many churches. Sometimes even donations must be refused because of the impression that is created if they are accepted. All immorally gained money must be given to benevolent causes and not to the church treasury (Deuteronomy 23:18; Matthew 27:3-8).

Later five men from the tribe of Dan came by looking for a new area to live. They had failed to possess the land the Lord had given them. Although excuses could be expressed, they failed because of their lack of faith in the Lord. Anything which the Lord tells us to do,

we can with His grace and help.

The Danites asked the Levite about his situation. Honestly he answered, *"Thus and thus dealeth Micah with me, and hath hired me, and I am his priest"* (Judges 18:4). He admitted that he had been hired and was Micah's priest, not the Lord's.

Jesus talked about the hireling in John 10. He is the Good Shepherd. The hireling runs when he sees the wolf coming. Jesus lays down His life for His sheep. His response is not based on the money, but rather on His love for and relationship with the sheep. In the same way the pastor is the under shepherd. He has the pastor's heart. If you have a pastor with such a heart of love for his people, be grateful and pray for him daily.

Remarkably the group from Dan then asked the Levite to pray for them (Judges 18:5). Does not this seem inconsistent after he had told them that he was a hireling? Also it appears that the Levite told them about how Micah had made the idol gods. People are so gullible. When the evidence is so strong that a work is not of the Lord, why follow and support it? I am regularly amazed at how folks get caught up in something scripturally unsound when the signs all around seem to be shouting, "Stay away, this is not of the Lord."

Sold for the Best Offer

The problem with having a priest who serves you for selfish gain is that someone else may come along with a better offer. After the Danite spies found a weak city in the far north of Israel, they returned with an army. When they went into the house of gods to steal the idols, the Levite asked what they were doing. After being warned to keep quiet, he was invited to go with them. They reasoned, *"Is it better for thee to be a priest unto the house of one man, or that thou be a priest unto a tribe and a family in Israel? And the priest's heart was glad"* (Judges 18:19-20). The hireling always will follow his heart, and his heart is set on the things of this world. His true nature is just coming out.

Verses 30-31 tell of the long-term impact of these events. Some scholars see the captivity spoken about to be one during the times of the Philistines rather than that of the Assyrians. Either way self-absorbed ministers of God often hurt the Lord's cause for many years.

LESSON 11

Worse Than Sodom

Judges 19:29-30

When a listing of the worst societies in history is given, Sodom and Gomorrah tend to be near the top of the list. Judges 19 shows the parallels between Sodom and the days of the judges. Sadly the situation looks even worse than Sodom because the events are being perpetrated by God's chosen people.

First let us review the account presented in Genesis 19. In verse 1 two angels arrive at Sodom near sundown: *"Lot sat in the gate of Sodom: and Lot seeing them rose up to meet them; and he bowed himself with his face toward the ground"* (Genesis 19:1). Notice that Lot had become a city leader sitting in the seat as judge. In Genesis 13:12, the scriptures tell us that when Lot arrived in the plains he *"pitched his tent toward Sodom."* His front door facing Sodom indicated that he was open to the influences there. After years of living in Sodom he was recognized as a leader.

Also notice the greeting Lot showed those spiritual men when they arrived. He invited them to spend the night with him and leave early the next morning, apparently before it would be dangerous in that community. When the angels hesitated, Lot insisted that they come to his house. Some have argued that the sin of Sodom was not ho-

The Heart of the Lesson

When the floodgates of heathen influences are opened, the flow can drive people to strange situations. Guard yourself carefully from the influences of society around you.

mosexuality, but the lack of hospitality. Although that clearly stands out in the passage, it does not explain why God would destroy the cities with fire and brimstone from heaven. The men of Sodom surrounded Lot's house and demanded, *"Where are the men which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them"* (Genesis 19:5). The word *know* is used in the biblical sense here of having sexual relations. Lot responded, *"I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof"* (Genesis 19:8). The offer of his virgin daughters to these wicked men sounds repulsive to godly parents. We must make sure, however, that we protect our children from immoral people in our culture.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday.....Judges 19:1-10
Tuesday.....Judges 19:11-21
Wednesday.....Judges 19:22-28
Thursday.....Genesis 19:1-11
Friday.....Genesis 19:12-29
Saturday.....Genesis 19:30-38

After the Sodomites told Lot to back off, they declared, *"This one fellow came in to sojourn, and he will needs be a judge: now will we deal worse with thee, than with them. And they pressed sore upon the man, even Lot, and came near to break the door"* (Genesis 19:9). With a pun they seemed to be questioning what right he had to judge them. The world, then and now, does not want anyone to judge its behavior as wrong. Lot's situation was dangerous as they tried to break down the door. The angels struck the Sodomites with blindness *"so that they wearied themselves to find the door"* (Genesis 19:11). Even after receiving the judgment of God, they continued to seek entrance in order to satisfy their perverted cravings.

What an awful record of events this is. In our text for today, however, we shall see many details which are identical. Amazingly in some ways the events in Judges will be shown to be worse than Sodom.

Worse Because God's Chosen People Were Involved

Although many of the events in Genesis 19 are just as tragic to the individuals, the situation in Judges 19 seems more tragic because all of the participants were Israelites. Whereas Lot represented a people from a godly background, the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah were heathen. On the other hand, all those described in this chapter of Judges are from the tribes of Israel. The harm and reproach to God's name are not effected when those identified with

the devil are doing wrong. When Christians act in abominable ways, it brings a different kind of shame.

The account begins with another wandering Levite who takes a concubine. After being unfaithful to him, she goes to her father's house in Bethlehemjudah (Judges 19:1-3). Four months later he goes to try to woo her back. He is called her husband. The next few verses tell of the insistent hospitality shown by the father-in-law. On the fifth day the Levite refused to stay longer and left for his home. When he came near to the city of the Jebusites, his servant tried to get him to go in to spend the night. He refused because they were not Jews (Judges 19:11-13). Traveling on until dark they arrived at Gibeah, a city of the Benjamites. None from the city, however, took them in. After dark an old man from Ephraim came in from the fields and invited the group to stay with him. This provided a setting for the horrendous events to follow.

Worse Because God's People Fell Into the Same Perversions

Later in the night when the company was enjoying their rest *"the men of the city, certain sons of Belial, beset the house round about, and beat at the door, and spake to the master of the house, the old man, saying, Bring forth the man that came into thine house, that we may know him"* (Judges 19:22). The homosexuals seeking to force themselves upon the guests were Jews.

I realize that condemning homosexual activity is not politically correct in today's world. Nevertheless the Bible is clear on the issue. In Moses' record of God's rules the law states: *"If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them"* (Leviticus 20:13). In grace today their lives are spared, but the fact that God listed it as a capital offense shows that He views it as a serious failure. Some would respond, "But that is Old Testament law." Paul writes, *"For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet"* (Romans 1:26-27).

Worse Because God's People Are Misapplying His Word

In an almost uncanny way the similarities between Genesis 19 and Judges 19 develop. When the old man goes out to confront the

sodomites of Gibeah, he offers, *"Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you: but unto this man do not so vile a thing"* (Judges 19:24). Obviously the man was aware of the earlier biblical account. He imitates the actions of Lot in offering his daughter.

The Old Testament examples were written so we could profit from them (1 Corinthians 10:11; Romans 15:4). The problem is this man misapplies the principles. The lesson learned properly in Genesis 19 about Lot would be a warning, not a support of his actions. Having a chapter and verse as a proof text does not justify you if you are taking it out of context and misapplying the truth which God is making. Paul admonishes, *"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15).

Leonard Ravenhill wrote a book entitled *Sodom Had No Bible.* When the heathen live perversely, they may be acting out of ignorance. When God's Word lays out His expectations, we are without excuse. The revelation and instruction available to us makes many of our sins to be worse than theirs.

Worse Because God's People Are So Casual to Atrocities

When the men of the city would not listen, *"the man took his concubine, and brought her forth unto them; and they knew her, and abused her all the night until the morning"* (Judges 19:25). They gang raped her. That would be bad enough, but the inspired scriptures adds that they abused her all night. We can only imagine what that twisted group would do. The end result of the experience was her death on the doorstep at dawn the next day. Even many unbelievers often show more morals and integrity than God's people.

Notice the casual response by the Levite the next morning. Seeing her on the threshold, he said, *"Up, and let us be going. But none answered. Then the man took her up upon an ass, and the man rose up, and gat him unto his place"* (Judges 19:28). Although his later actions suggest it bothered him, his initial response was weak at best.

The chapter ends with the gruesome description of his dividing her body into twelve pieces. Then one portion was sent to each of the other twelve tribes throughout Israel. Can you imagine getting a body part in the mail. The people were finally moved to action (Judges 19:29-30). Why does it take something so extreme to get their attention? Some Christians today may be going with the flow of society to such a point they will not recognize the dangers until disaster strikes.

LESSON 12

Reaction to an Atrocity

Judges 20:48

The closing verses of Judges 19 set the background for the battle against the tribe of Benjamin. There we saw that after the men from the city of Gibeah raped and murdered his concubine, the Levite cut her body into twelve pieces and mailed one to each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Their immediate reaction was, "No one has ever seen anything like this before. What do you think" (Author's paraphrase of Judges 19:30). It became the talk of the country. Everyone wanted to know what everyone else thought.

Such talk tends to be what happens when atrocities occur today. Just as it was in that day, we hear discussions from all perspectives. For days after 9/11, almost all of the news and much of the conversation centered on how unusual and unexpected was that attack. In this modern age we often have a television program detailing each event as it transpires. Overexposure to extreme and tragic situations can have several negative effects on us. First, we may become desensitized. People are unable to maintain the same high level of intensity for unlimited periods of time. Overexposure crushes the spirit of people. Therefore we lose the feeling of the significance of events after a while. Even those hardened folks during the dark days of the judges, however, were shocked by the delivery of body parts.

The Heart of the Lesson

When God's people usurp His authority, they will reap their own destruction. Avoid exercising your vengeance instead of waiting on God.

The Reasoned Response

Daily Bible Readings

Monday .....Judges 20:1-7
Tuesday.....Judges 20:8-16
Wednesday.....Judges 20:17-21
Thursday.....Judges 20:22-25
Friday .....Judges 20:26-35
Saturday.....Judges 20:36-47

The natural response to such an atrocity is to go into action without the facts. The nature of the circumstances push many toward an emotional act. In our text the men of the tribes of Israel searched for the answers first (Judges 20:1-7). They heard from the Levite himself. Next the group found the unity and commitment that had been missing in other situations (Judges 20:8-11). All of that response seemed very positive.

Finally the representatives from the rest of Israel approached all of the Benjamites with a request: *"Deliver us the men, the children of Belial, which are in Gibeah, that we may put them to death, and put away evil from Israel"* (Judges 20:13). The opportunity for justice was lost because the tribe of Benjamin had no interest in giving up the guilty. No reason for their refusal is stated in the scripture record. We would assume that the majority in Benjamin did not condone homosexuality, rape, and murder. Pride was probably the issue in their minds. Clearly they did not have a close connection to the other tribes. Their refusal had devastating consequences.

The army from Benjamin had twenty-six-thousand men in addition to seven hundred who were from Gibeah. Among Benjamin's soldiers were seven hundred left-handed men who could aim their sling shots at a target the width of a hair and never miss (Judges 20:16). The rest of the tribes brought four hundred thousand to fight for them. Sadly the sons of Jacob were about to have a civil war. The reasoned efforts at the beginning failed.

The Daily Response

Weeks or months passed after the initial response to the atrocity. Sending the messages between all the groups involved could not have been done in a moment then. The passage of time often causes people to lose their excitement for an earlier cause. People's anger burns hot, but then subsides quickly. God's wrath against wrong is constant. The psalmist expresses it: *"God is angry with the wicked every day"* (Psalm 7:11). Keeping the proper level of passion is always a test in dealing with evil.

Again the children of Israel seem to do well as they gather at the tabernacle to seek the Lord's will. Instead of asking if they should go to battle or how, they ask who shall lead them (Judges 20:18). Although they probably were right to go, the value of prayer is limited

if you formulate your plans without God and then ask Him to bless. The entire process reveals a people who were trying to follow their own reasoning rather than radically open themselves up to the Lord. The entire situation was emblematic of the conditions in the nation. Sometimes when the perspective of all the nation is humanistic, finding the righteous cause becomes difficult.

Our view is that surely God would destroy those who identified with the sodomites and murderers. When the two armies fought, surprisingly 22,000 of the united tribes were killed. No mention is made of even one from Benjamin dying. How often does God surprise like that?

Next they strengthened and encouraged themselves to return to the fight (Judges 20:22-25). This time they asked if they should enter into battle. The Lord's answer was to go. After the second battle 18,000 Israelite soldiers lay dead. Was God vindicating the people and events in Gibeah? Probably not, but God often draws the attention of His people through the strange and unusual.

The third battle followed (Judges 20:26-48). The preparation appeared much more intense for the final battle. For the first time Phinehas, the high priest, interceded. Finally the Lord not only instructed them to send the armies, He promised victory.

When they went against the city of Gibeah, the Benjamites came out and began to kill as before. When the Israelites fell back, they lured the army of Benjamin away from the city. Another portion of the group from the tribes entered the city and set it on fire. Outmanned and outside the city, the Benjamites fell in defeat.

The Excessive Response

After the final battle only six hundred soldiers from Benjamin escaped to the rock Rimmon (Judges 20:47). Israel's destruction of those who had fought them may be understandable. The problem is that they did not stop there. After Gibeah had been burned and the army vanquished, *"The men of Israel turned again upon the children of Benjamin, and smote them with the edge of the sword, as well the men of every city, as the beast, and all that came to hand: also they set on fire all the cities that they came to"* (Judges 20:48). This wording describes a scorched-earth policy. They turned back to kill every Benjamite in every one of their cities. The men are mentioned because of the need in the next chapter, but clearly they wiped out the women and children as well. And as if that did not do the job, they destroyed the animals and everything else that came into their hands. For good measure they burned all of their cities.

At the beginning we might have thought that we identified with the tribes. Were they the instruments of God? So often developments

prove that *"the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God"* (James 1:20). At the end most decent folks would want to separate from their efforts.

Even if the cause is just at its start, we must make sure that the process we follow is righteous and pleases God. Surely even a good intentioned person or group can overreact to an atrocity and commit their own. Because of the pull toward extreme responses, God gave the law of "an eye for an eye." The original purpose was not to require revenge, but to limit reaction to *only* an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21).

The Vengeful Response

Not only did the children of Israel offer a physical response to the atrocity, they also swore an oath: *"There shall not any of us give his daughter unto Benjamin to wife"* (Judges 21:1). Since they had killed all the ladies of Benjamin and most of the men, this meant that the tribe would cease without some special efforts. This rash vow went beyond what the Lord expected in the situation. The tribe of Benjamin was still one of God's chosen. The tribes were about to eliminate the future existence of the first king, Saul. They were about to eliminate the forerunners of the apostle Paul. Beforehand it appeared right in their eyes to make such a commitment. Afterward they recognized that their efforts were contrary to the revealed plan of God. The Israelites probably did not think through all the consequences of their vow. Even a reaction to an atrocity must be tested by God's will and Word.

Actually their reasoning was ironic in these circumstances. God had instructed the children of Israel to completely destroy the Canaanites who lived in their country and their cities. They claimed that they were not able to do this. Instead they had banded together and had nearly annihilated one of their brothers. Rather than dealing justly with the atrocity by the men of Gibeah, they committed as bad an atrocity against the tribe of Benjamin. This danger always lurks. Remember Paul's warning to the Roman Christians: *"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head"* (Romans 12:19-20). May God grant us wisdom and grace in applying these principles as we seek justice in this wicked world.

LESSON 13

The Solutions

Judges 21:25

With an appalling spirit of bloodthirsty revenge the soldiers of Israel destroyed the people, animals, and property of Benjamin. When they finally regained control of themselves, only six hundred men of Benjamin survived. Instead of admitting their mistake, *"The people came to the house of God, and abode there till even before God, and lifted up their voices, and wept sore; and said, O LORD God of Israel, why is this come to pass in Israel, that there should be to day one tribe lacking in Israel?"* (Judges 21:2-3). As many people do today, they tried to blame God. Either they missed or ignored the facts that they were actively involved in the near elimination of the tribe of Benjamin. Any attempt to deal with deep-rooted wrongs is bound to fail without an honest appraisal. We cannot become free until we confess the truth.

Reason's Solution — A Wife

Not only did the tribes lock themselves into the destruction of Benjamin, they tried to throw away the key. They had sworn that any group of Israelites which did not appear at the earlier meeting would be killed (Judges 21:5). Now they were looking for wives so the tribe of Benjamin could continue. Behold, at the far boundaries of the

The Heart of the Lesson

When we stray from God, we cannot recognize righteous solutions to our problems. Be sure you are not treating the superficial rather than the root problems.

tribes on the other side of Jordan were the people of Jabesh-gilead. They had not shown up to swear that their daughters would not marry into Benjamin. Their solution sounded simple. Go and kill the men, women, and children of the region who were not virgins (Judges 21:10-15). The four hundred virgins who survived were given to the remaining men of Benjamin at the rock Rimmon.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday ..... Judges 21:1-3
Tuesday ..... Judges 21:4-15
Wednesday ..... Judges 21:16-24
Thursday ..... 1 Samuel 9:1-27
Friday ..... 1 Samuel 10:1-27
Saturday ..... Philippians 3:3-7

Still two hundred Benjamite men did not have wives. Because the Israelites had sworn not to give their daughters in marriage, another solution was needed. Someone thought about the annual feasts of the Lord at the tabernacle. The young ladies from Shiloh would go out dancing in celebration of the feast. The remaining men of Benjamin without wives were told to hide in the vineyards near the roads. Then they could kidnap these women and marry them (Judges 21:16-23).

Do you notice that the solutions the Israelites devised involved murder and kidnapping of the innocent? Their actions illustrate again that human reasoning will fall far short of God's will. Their solution was in clear violation of the revealed will of God found in His law. Although their efforts were creative, they did not understand the biblical principles well enough to use them as litmus tests. Knowledge of and commitment to the revealed Word of God is essential if we are to please Him.

When we read the account at the end of Judges we are appalled and amazed at their response. Even though it made perfect sense to them, the obvious flaws in their approach are glaring to us. Why did they not see their erroneous thinking. Too often people focus on the superficial issues and miss the major ones. In this case they saw that a tribe was about to be eliminated, but they could not see their responsibility. They knew they were bound by a vow, yet they took matters into their own hands through massacre and kidnapping. Even though they thought they were acting based on principles, they were violating the basic codes of God. In the same way many today are making decisions about abortion, capital punishment, and other issues from a narrow-minded perspective.

The Writer's Solution — A King

The writer of Judges felt that a king was important to the solution of the circumstances in Canaan. While a king might have helped in some situations, only inner godliness was going to solve the sin

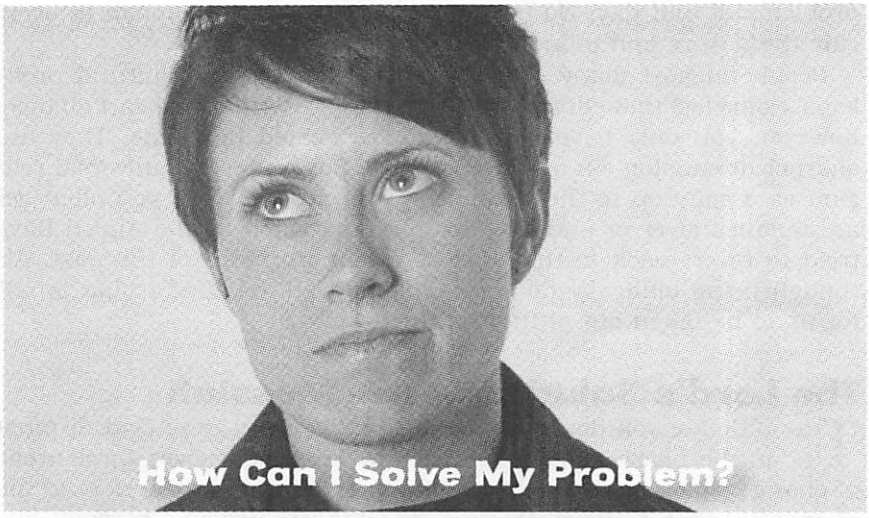
problems of that day. No person would be powerful enough to overrule the nature and influences of the people.

People suggest many solutions to today's sin and cultural problems. Some feel that education will do the job. Without a heart change, however, you only have smarter and educated heathens. They are sharper at causing sin and devastation. Some present universal religion as a solution to the problems of the world. What you often get are fanatics at error and sin. Some groups such as the Amish have tried to revert back to the separation opportunities of the past. Although being biblically different will separate us, God's plan is not for us to be taken out of the world.

The Lord's Solution — The Messiah

The ultimate solution must be in the revelation from God. It must be in the hearts of people. The New Testament gives three areas of change which make a lasting difference. First, rebirth refers to the change of heart. Regeneration makes all things new in a person's life. Then repentance means a change of mind. A person's thinking must be transformed in order to be different. Finally conversion points out the change in walk or lifestyle. All of these actions are essential to a lasting difference.

Although the book of Judges ends in the negative without a solution to the pull of sin and culture, the time period of the judges does not. The next book in the Bible is the book of Ruth. It develops the picture of the kinsman redeemer, Boaz, who points toward Christ. It ends with the words: *"And Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David"* (Ruth 4:22). It serves as a transition between Judges and the Kings. This verse introduces David, the second and greatest king. He is a prominent picture of Christ. These developments pave the way for the coming of Jesus. He will be the Messiah Who would take away the sin of the world (at His first advent) and reign with an everlasting, righteous reign (at His second coming).



Israel was constantly looking for their own ways to solve the problems that they created through their own poor choices. What was the result? More problems. Who would ever imagine trying to solve the problem of a shortage of wives by proposing mass murder and kidnapping? Yet that's exactly what happened.

That kind of thinking comes from an unregenerate heart and mind, and it's still going on today. People constantly devise their own solutions to the problems that their sin has created in their lives. The result is that many people believe they have solved their sin problem, but they have only made their problems worse. The ultimate, disastrous consequence of their choices will be revealed when they face God's final judgment and realize they didn't fulfill His requirements.

What does God require?

God requires **regeneration**, a change of heart. Regeneration makes all things new in a person's life (John 3:7).

God requires **repentance**, a change of mind. A person's thinking must be transformed in order to be different. God's people don't simply turn over a new leaf, but by His grace completely turn around to His righteousness (Acts 17:30).

God requires a **conversion**, change in walk or lifestyle. A person must be converted from sinner to saint. Only as a person becomes a new creature in Christ can all the old problems of sin be erased (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The only way that can happen is by God's grace through your faith in Jesus (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus died for your sins so that when you trust completely in His offering, you will receive God's forgiveness and His everlasting life.

And that's the *only* solution to your problem!

How can I learn to trust God more?

In *Trusting God* Jerry Bridges contends that as you begin to explore the scope of God's power over nations, nature, and the detailed lives of individuals, you'll begin to acknowledge His loving control. And as you come to know Him better, you'll find yourself trusting Him more completely.

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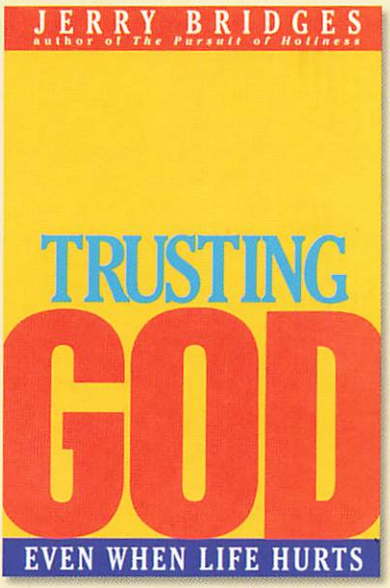

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